Judgmental Behavior

CS109: Ethical Foundations of Computer Science
January 30, 2018
What is a Judgment?

• From Merriam-Webster:
  • The process of forming an opinion or evaluation by discerning and comparing
  • An opinion or estimate so formed
Are Judgments Inherently Bad?

• Of course not! Humans need to evaluate things all the time!
• The problem comes when judgments turn into stereotypes and/or the judger fails to consider additional variables
Why Do Humans Stereotype?

• Antonio Damasio studied patients with brain lesions that make them unable to feel emotions
  • Patients also had trouble making decisions despite being able to phrase the choice in logical terms
  • Implication: emotion is a requisite part of decision-making

• Neuroimaging also supports that human emotion influences the reasoning part of the brain

• Quick judgments that bypass rational consideration have helped humans survive historically

• ...but this has led to some unfortunate side effects!
Stereotypes are not rational

• Emotional and anecdotal evidence informs “gut response”
• Rational mind justifies these conclusions rather than creates them
• Just consider stereotypes surrounding women (~3.8B or half of the earth’s population)
  • While there are anatomical differences in male versus female brains, the distributions highly overlap
  • Neuroscience suggests brains can change structurally based on experiences beyond their inherent biology
  • Also how is it rational to believe that they have similar emotional and behavioral profiles based on the incredibly small subsample you’ve encountered?
Example: The Google Memo

• Full article here: https://gizmodo.com/exclusive-heres-the-full-10-page-anti-diversity-screed-1797564320

• Google employee writes memo to open discussion about Google’s biases, claiming they unfairly favor employing women over men in a bid for equality
  • Believes men and women have biological differences that make women less suited to software development
  • Women are more anxious and have too much empathy to work in development environment
  • Cites statistics on this to support his supposedly unbiased and fact-based opinion
• But is it fact-based?
What Went Wrong?

• Humans are not particularly good at statistics
  • Unlike pigeons who are better at solving the Monty Hall problem!
• Humans are prone to confirmation bias
  • Easy to discard facts that contradict beliefs while reinforcing beliefs with supporting evidence
• A lot of statistical training and knowledge is required to conduct experiments properly
  • But when our self identity involves being “smart” we just assume we can pick up those things
• Many studies only show correlation – causation is harder to prove
  • Especially hard in population studies which can have tremendous number of variables
And Even If He Were Right...

- His conclusions are still questionable at best!
- Empathy and teamwork are critical parts of working at a large company/creating industry-grade code
  - The things he argues as not ideal qualities for development are in fact **explicitly necessary** for development and promotion

- Rebuttal article by former Google employee here: https://medium.com/@yonatanzunger/so-about-this-googlers-manifesto-1e3773ed1788
How Do We Know What’s Unbiased/True?

• You don’t necessarily!
• Some studies are blatantly wrong or biased (see Andrew Wakefield)
  • But numerous well-meaning, well-conducted studies may still seemingly conflict
• Important to:
  • Consider why your views are what they are
  • Be critical of studies (particularly conclusions) even when you agree with their results
  • Avoid oversimplifying complex systems like the world and human society
  • Be open to other people’s perspectives and life experiences
  • Treat others with as much empathy and kindness as possible
People are Different

• People want and need different things
  • Do not assume you know what’s best for someone

• People view and interact with the world differently
  • Do not assume you know someone’s motivations

• Giving people the benefit of the doubt and showing compassion helps your personal well-being
  • Helps reduce stress and anxiety
Case Study: Black Lives Matter

• Grassroots activist movement campaigning against violence and systemic racism against black people


• Consider the following questions for your discussion:
  • What is the movement’s history and purpose?
  • What are some examples of how racism and stereotypes have contributed to the violence committed against black people?
  • What is one way to start addressing the problem (in terms of either personal, local, or national policy)?
Case Study: Sexual Consent

• People do not always agree on definitions of sexual consent
  • Some things are obvious, others less so
• What is a helpful definition of consent and why?
• Consider the following question for your discussion:
  • Why might someone feel uncomfortable telling their partner “no”?
  • Why might someone be uncertain whether their partner’s consent is “enthusiastic”?
  • How can someone help their partner feel safe and have fun?
References

• <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/528151/the-importance-of-feelings/>
• <http://neurosciencenews.com/male-female-brain-differences-3617/>
• <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3086893/>